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The Old Schools and the New.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

CLOSING EXERCISES OF THE TWENTY-NINTH TERM

OF THE

NEW YORK STATE NORMAL SCHOOL,

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BY

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ADDRESS.

When friends are leaving for a new country, we go down to the pier where the iron Giant leans resting on his elbows, awaiting the signal to force the black hull through stormy seas and mirrory waste of waters, to the land of labor and of promise. With merry words, and glistening eyes, we squeeze their hands; with swelling hearts and husky voices, we cheer when the hawsers are cast off, and, sadly remembering how our past care of them fell short, gaily bid them "take care of themselves." As the ship glides into the stream, and slowly creeps up to the line of the horizon, till at last the whole jostling crowd of bold and timid, loving and selfish, ambitious and quiet are crushed into one black dot in the blue distance; strange fantasies, gloomy doubts and comfortable assurances meet and mix within the breasts of those who stay behind. So here, when another class cast off the fastening that for years have bound them, and swing out into the stream, anxious friends crowd around them to bid good cheer to the departing, and strangers can not look on unmoved. What fate awaits these new recipients of the diploma? Will they find friends in the new homes they seek, and nuggets in the mines they mean to work? or will they eat poisonous herbs, fall among false friends, and wrestle with grizzlies on the mountain? Will they bravely hold out amidst storms and oftenest be wafted by the balmy breath of propitious skies? or will they be shivered on unmapped rocks, pine with exhausted stores, lie impotent in the sea's trough? High hopes and unwhispered fears, stop on shore at every ship's departure, and hopes no less exalted, fears no less carefully concealed, tarry with these teachers and these friends, when each new graduate leaves this

school to face the world, for which this was the threshold and port of preparation.

Indeed, no doubt most of the anxiety is on the part of those who are left behind. You who are going, are rid henceforth, for a time at least, from the irksomeness of set duties. While you suffer some sharp pangs at the sundering of friendly ties, you can not deny that your spirits rise—the ballast that so long weighed them down, to-day being tumbled over the side. True there is some tremor—Leander felt some as he plunged into the Hellespont, though the languishing Hero was on the farther side. You are at the door of a new world, your hand is on the knocker, and how should you know whether Beauty or the Beast will open it? You are about to lead off a solo—unattended for a while at least, before a gaping auditory; whether the first note will be the one you essay, or its sadly flattened fellow, you can only guess. Teaching school, after all, is very much like discovering Continents, somewhat easier after the first successful effort.

But take courage, friends; the business you engage in stands well with the world; it is a most honorable one, and about as remunerative as any of the professions. Your work is certainly a most important one, equal to most in the firmness of its impression upon the passing hour—yielding to none in its power to shape the future history of the world. You go down to meet the up-coming generation; to take it by the hand and lead it to the upland of quiet usefulness, or the perilous heights of fame. Like Sandy Hook pilots, you go far down to sea, hail and board the arriving fleet of patriots, poets, men of mark, and pilot them through “the Swash,” or “the main channel” clear of shoals, past quicksands, up to their port. Upon your faithfulness and skill, perhaps more than upon any one other element of molding power, it depends whether the people of the Empire State in 1880, shall be the intelligent, powerful, hearty race of men which the spirit and genius of the times has pledged that they shall be. Indeed the dullest mind can not dwell for a moment upon the nature of the teacher’s errand without an overwhelming sense of its importance.

But to expatiate upon this theme was no part of my intention to-day. I came simply, at the bidding of those who have your interest at heart, and the pledge of my poor services ever, to charge you seriously, that you touch with no bungling hand the dainty mechanisms

that the people will entrust to you in your new calling; and to congratulate you that the field you enter on is broken up, ploughed and harrowed; that in other words, a new era has opened on the schools. The date of that epoch we can fix to a day. It was that day in each district when the teacher discovered and the people confessed that the true office of the teacher was not *to instruct* but *to educate* children. The just appreciation of the difference between education and instruction was the high wall of separation—the barrier firm and solid, between the old style of schools and the new. The account current with Popular Ignorance was closed, and a new leaf turned over, when the great fact fairly dawned upon the teacher that it was none of his business to tumble facts into the child's mind, as if it were a sunken lot to be filled up, nor even to pile up facts in orderly array in it. The child's mind is not a mail bag to be stuffed with a certain quantity of letters, news, knowledge of one sort or another, locked, labeled and despatched on its route through life; it is rather to be treated as a living, growing power or combination of powers—of imagination to be fed on what imagination craves; memory to be grown and strengthened on Mr. Gradgrind's facts; judgment cultivated by opportunities to select the right out of the indifferent and the wrong; the reasoning faculty to be developed by exploring the relations that exist between cause and effect; and all of this intellectual feed to be administered through the medium of the child's interest. And in every living thing, every objective topic of thought, the child is interested. Its curiosity would explore every secret of nature, but it is smitten down by the surrounding ignorance, perpetually rebuffed by the stupidity of those who should be its instructors. True, there are many things to be learned—to be committed to memory for which we have no taste (though they may have)—that immense budget of facts comprised in the multiplication table, and that other world of facts in the spelling of words. The task of remembering these, which we should make such hard work of, seems trivial to them. Happily, childhood is capable of accomplishing very much, from which manhood shrinks away, distrustful of its power. But memory, infantile or manly, seems to be constituted as the crab is--disposed to hold fast that at which we are constantly plucking, but relaxing its grasp upon what we surrender. The thousand dry facts that constitute orthography, and the multiplication table, there is no day in the year, nor year in our lives, that we have not occasion to pluck at, and hence memory holds them with unflinching tenacity. The error of the old school-master was in cramming into the memory, ten thousand other

things, severally important enough, but for which there was to be no daily use, with the hope that they would lie quiet and in time be digested—as if memory were some ruminating animal that browsed through the school-days, and then lay down like cows to chew the cud. But we forget our Catechism, if not called upon to teach it; we should forget our Lord's Prayer, if happily He had not set thorns along our road to wound us every day, that remembering its balm, we may use it, or given us little ones who at our lips require to learn the charm. We forget our rules of grammar, the whole tedious catalogue of poly-syllables that by courtesy we continue to call geography—we forget all except those little scraps of rhyme which delighted us with their jingling, and so entered into our being, with such associations of pleasure that neither Time can filch, nor Business wrench them out of our possession.

Perhaps we find in nothing so much as in the matter of Grammar, the old style of stuffing continued where there ought to be teaching. Grammar, if I rightly remember the time-honored definition, "teaches the art of speaking and writing the language correctly." But the Grammar that I studied taught no such thing. The intricacies of that noble, most essential art, come not of Grammar, but of teachers. Grammar is the philosophical explanation of phenomena occurring in the language of polite and polished society. It is for those who already speak and write almost correctly, and its formulæ of rules are absolutely necessary as caskets for our weak memories to preserve principles and the aggregates of information in. They furnish the gauges by which we justify our practice and correct provincialisms. But teaching the philosophy of art does not teach the art itself. Else why do we perpetually hear men who are quite familiar with the rules, stumbling among the tenses, persons and numbers, like blind men among the tombs? The children of educated parents, on the other hand, who from infancy have heard language correctly used, seldom blunder, after that age when it is "cunning" to govern verbs singular by objectives plural. Now, there is no one thing which it will be your duty to teach so thoroughly and faithfully as the art of using language right and well, and not to your Grammar class only, but to all who come under your roof—to the blacksmith's poor-house apprentice who turns in "for a month's schooling" in winter, and to the frocked boy who is not yet past "B-a-k-e-r" in his Orthography. And you can do still more by stealth than formally. Ask that chubby youth who is always so hot after the ball at recess, how the game

went on, how his last skating match went off, how he got through with his last holiday, and when he has learned to confide in you, he will reel off the story with no lack of words. But as he warms to the rehearsal, you see at a glance, in what department of Grammar he is deficient. Kindly correct his errors, but not too many at a time lest you discourage him. Follow it up, however, and he can not fail to improve rapidly. When he has become interested in correcting his own errors, if old enough to comprehend abstractions, he will turn to Grammar with relish; and now not one teacher only, but he has a hundred teaching him Grammar. The ploughman geeing and hawing his oxen, the schoolmate rehearsing his last adventure, his father rebuking his heedlessness, are all furnishing either models of correctness that delight him, or specimens of false Grammar that his swift thoughts are correcting in the midst of the story, the rebuke, the commendation. Does the food of the feeder digest any better, for his knowledge of the comparative solubilities of the various articles of food? But when one's digestion is good, it is a matter of pleasant curiosity to know how much longer beef than venison must lie quarantined, before their several virtues may become part and parcel of the human machine. So, to know the philosophy of language and its construction is pleasant, but to construct it well, which is not dependent on the philosophy of the thing, is essential.

In the method of teaching Geography too, there is left a great deal of the leaven of the old school fermenting. It is yet too much a dry matter of Mesopotamias, Michilimackinacks, Seringapatams and the like. The child peeping into a book of Geography, seeing the pictures of lions in Africa, of elephants in India, of rafts on Western rivers, is sure that he will come up to this delightful study as to the reading of a fairy tale. Shame on our teachers that he is so often doomed to disappointment; that what he anticipated as a delicious collection of travelers' tales, he finds a dismal desert of boundaries that shift with the whims of autocrats, and the schemes of politicians—of capitals that can not possibly retain their position while he is fixing them in memory—of latitudes and longitudes which to all the world except sailors and employees on the Coast Survey convey no more definite impression than uninterpreted Syriac. There is not in all the world of humanity a child that does not love stories, but Geography is a traveler's story, and teachers have no excuse for dispelling the charm, or apology for shedding dullness on the theme. The hour of recitation in Geography may be made, and ought to be, the season for

encouraging the curiosity, gratifying the inquisitiveness, and exciting the interest of the pupil.

History as taught even yet is too much a mere thread to string dry dates on. Compilers dissect away all that goes to make her rounded, shapely form of beauty, and pointing to the rattling skeleton of bones and shriveled ligaments, ask us to fall in love with history. Is it not a shame that the exciting history of our own state's growth, every chapter of which has the charm of a romance, from the beginning when the wise men from Communipaw sallied forth to explore the marvels of Hell Gate, and under the cloud that the great Van Twiller raised, founded New Amsterdam, down till the present when the enlarged canals are almost completed, and the Empire State numbers within its boundaries three and a half millions of people, and one starting from its easternmost limits exhausts almost a day and a night in reaching the western line, though he rush through at a most rapid rate of steam, but never in all his flight passes out of the circle of some common school district or some well marked church's influence or the close vicinity of some happy homestead—is it not a shame that the stirring story of all this growth should be construed and corrupted into a disgusting “muddle” of dates of city foundations, of Indian wars, and of the beginnings and endings of gubernatorial terms? It is a wonder that the Muse of History has not long ago torn up her tablets in disgust at the stupidities that are perpetrated in her name.

The great mistake left over from the old, in the new era, is in supposing that a child goes to school to learn facts. That were utterly unnecessary. The facts of the world lie patent—scattered up and down it everywhere; moreover they are all soluble and ready for ingestion. The great object of the school and of the teacher should be to *interest* the scholar. Interest him in the structure of language and everywhere, anywhere, at home, abroad, by the way, wherever there is a book or a human voice he finds a teacher in Grammar. Interest him in Geography, and the mute book, the daily *pot pourri* that we call newspaper, the rough whaleman rolling up the street, the unwashed immigrant just landed, are all teachers of Geography. In his companion just returned from a cruise to China, in his toothless, wrinkled old nurse born in Ireland, in the white-headed negro stolen on the Guinea coast half a century ago, he finds Strabos, Humboldts, Malte Bruns and Morses. Interest him in Geology, and the pebble he hurls

with his sling, the boulder interrupting the carriage-way, the outcropping strata of rocks that make the mountains, the impalpable dust teach him Geology and preach Theology at every step he takes by daylight. Interest him in Natural Science, and every weed and flower utters entertainment for him, every dead and living thing solicits to study and nourishes his intellectual growth. Educate the senses of the little ones whom you are entrusted to lead up to maturity. Educate the eye to see something beside the text in books. It needs no costly apparatus, no high-priced lenses, no outlay for microscopes, to bring before their vision ten thousand marvels in the minutiae of nature's works, that will stir the blood of the most sluggish; and when you have once interested them, you can easily turn them in any direction you desire. God meant our children to be naturalists. He endowed them with the love of nature and gave them the senses to perceive her relations and appreciate her cunning methods. How the eye of infancy opens and sparkles as you tell the traits of animals and the habits of plants! The child omits his dinner to see where the blind mole's burrow runs, to watch the movements of the minnow in the creek, to follow the hermit crab along the beach, to listen the different whistles of birds, to see how the spider comes out of his contest with the blue-bottle, to note which way the worm is squirming, to see what the hairy caterpillar creeps up the grape-vine for. All his instincts go out after nature, and when he enters school he fancies they are to be encouraged and gratified. It is a shame that his school days should so restrain his early loves and teach him that books are the only things worth studying.

Our future is full of promise through the influence of our improved order of teachers. Our Free School system spreads its blessings over every acre of our soil. It tenders, free as air or water, an education to every child. The generation of teachers who "boarded 'round," and asked five dollars a month is rapidly dying out. And now there is no county, no town so remote that some school in it has not been made a model through the services of this Normal School. In the earnest workmen that leave these halls to-day, eager for the task of teaching, not words, but things, intending to use books to assist them, not to cram children from, to educate rather than to instruct, we have ample pledges that a good work will be wrought. And the public sentiment is pretty well prepared to appreciate your intelligent efforts. The ancient obstacles to the sensible teacher's progress are mostly removed, but perhaps the very one that will most

annoy you has been omitted from your anticipations. Within a few years past there have grown up, especially in the cities, examining boards, some of whose members have compassed the whole circle of the sciences, in their own estimation, inasmuch as they have swallowed whole the smallest text-books that feebly and dully treat of them. Seating yourself before one of these Solomons in the expectation of discovering to him, by your prompt answers to pertinent queries your perfect preparation, you shall find yourself overwhelmed with such questions as, "What was the date of the commencement of King Philip's war?" "What is the latitude and longitude of Boorhampoor?" "The Hoang Ho, on what parallel does it rise, which way run and what its comparative length with the Kiang Ki?" If these, and other equally frivolous questions are promptly answered in the very language of the Geography that the examiner swallowed, you shall receive a certificate of grade A. But if not—as of course you can not, since it is not your custom to carry such baggage in the engine-room, deeming it all sufficient if such truck is stuffed away in the baggage car, while you carry the check that admits you to overhaul it whenever necessary—do not for a moment suppose that you can obtain a first grade certificate, no matter what stores of useful knowledge you have at command, what tact at teaching, skill in interesting, power in governing without seeming to. And in your schools the same thing will annoy you; to see the scholar who nearest approaches the parrot, graded by the superficial examiner above her who in simple earnestness and in their spirit accomplishes the tasks you set. These Solomons in self-conceit are especially distrustful of college-bred men in the Common Schools. And there is a grain of truth in their assumption, that men fresh from their classics and full of nothing but what is dead in language, abstruse in reasoning and refined in science, do not gird themselves as easily and naturally to the task of teaching elementary principles as even those who are masters only of those principles. But as the greater includes the less, it must be true that the best educated man is best fitted to teach after he has once brought his mind to the business before him. Fortunately for your peace and for popular education, it is only in rare localities that these Sir Oracles of Ignorance preside over the examining boards; but where they do, if Daboll himself should re-appear and humbly sue for a certificate he would find it a tough task to pass in Arithmetic, and Humboldt would stumble dreadfully in Geography.

But the brightest prophecy of hope in your career is gathered from

a glance at the past history of the schools—at the schools as they were twenty years ago. Children in those old times must have learned more indirectly than directly. Detained six hours of each day, reading, writing and doing nothing, there daily was created a vacuum within their brains, so that when let loose, intelligence rushed in to fill it, from contact with the intelligent world outside. Meanwhile, it must be confessed that in school they learned to obey, to herd peacefully with their fellows, to give and take, to appreciate themselves according to their merits, being prompted thereto by the polishings-off of older and stouter boys, to “make their manners” to strangers, and to be courteous after a rough and Puritanic fashion. They learned the multiplication table too, and how to carry one, to spell, to point the feather end of the quill over the right shoulder, and so, through much tribulation, our fathers, as the phrase went, “got their learning.” No picture of the old school-master so vividly reproduces him, as when he is drawn with the birch under his left arm, the pen’s nib resting flat on the left thumb nail, and the keen edge of the pen-knife just about to amputate it on the line of the nail’s diagonal. What, with setting copies, ruling copy-books along the edge of that hickory ruler which did double duty—we remember with a shudder its other and more frequent application—lining off by virtue of that leaden plummet (which, with an art we deemed almost divine, he had cast, over night), the boundary below which the *as* and the *bs* must not dip, nor the *qs* and the *gs* far lift their heads—between these pedagogic employments and the endless whittling of quills, one almost wonders now how he got time to castigate our good grandmothers as they deserved, and to instill the multiplication table and manners into the rampant young dare-devils that grew up our grave grandsires. And when we remember the rough pine board shelves that we courteously called desks, through which so many busy jack-knives and knot-holes let daylight play, on which lay the solitary sheet of foolscap, our only writing-book, the rickety pens always just mended and always needing more mending, the little earthen inkstand, crammed with its wad of cotton dampened with pale ink, the marvel grows how our fathers escaped the necessity, when they made their wills, of signing their names with an X. I am not despising the old school-house. Having graduated out of it, be sure I shall always speak with tenderness of its memories.

The dear old hulk rises before my imagination now; its exterior time-stained and very modest, its roof mossy, its sides “pierced with

eight windows and a thousand holes," each broad-side and the doors covered with elaborate carving of sloops and trees and men, we called them, but our elders said they were pictures of benches set on end; its corners—for economy spurned the luxury of continuous underpinning—propped on unhewn boulders; and beneath it all was the sacred depository of sleds and ball-sticks, kites and hoops in their season, each boy's in his undisputed place. I see now its unplastered, unceiled interior, the rafters concealed by a floor, over which at noon-spell the brave, big boys groped, scaring out the mice and throwing the wasps' nests down on the heads of the frightened girls; its benches backless, made of pine slabs, out of which the pitch kept frying in hot days, supported by legs of cord-wood so carelessly protruding above as sadly to increase rents and necessitate patches. How the little box-stove glowed with heat in the centre of the room, and the centre too, of a row of ruddy urchins not yet promoted to the high seats, when the fire was fairly started and it had done smoking! how the wind whistled through the cracks and crannies and the rattling window sash, and abundantly insured that ventilation which, as furnished by the appliances of pulleys, cords and registers, and the infinitely puffed Dr. Reids of Edinboro', we cry up now-a-days as modern improvements. I should be ashamed to forget the wholesome "course" of the old school, its one long class in the English Reader, where all who could pass muster in the dissyllables of the spelling book were entitled to stand in ragged array and in all the attitudes of ingenious laziness, and read by the hour in turn, Dr. Blair's enchanting sermons on the beauties of virtue, and the side-shaking stories from the Spectator; or the cyphering over the thumb'd Daboll, our pale students being artistically classed into those who could carry one and those who could not, or the scholarly devotion to our granite slates on which we played pins, and with heads bent low, told how the master could do the rule of three as easily as he could add, and, on a pinch, with the book before him, even extract the square root; or for a moment forget the filling joy of that hour of Saturday, announced by the noon-mark on the floor in sunny days, or the sound of the conch-shell summoning the farmers to their dinner, when the master pronounced that unvarying benediction, "school's dismissed—go directly home," and with a bound and a hurrah we leaped into the open air, and were free to tease the old folks at home and pick up chips for the day's remainder. The old school had its virtues certainly. It kept us out of mischief at home for six hours of the day,

and gave our parents time to consider what they should set us at when older; but wedded as I am to all that is conservative, I can not honestly confess that I wish it back again.

And it never will reappear. The people once having tasted the fruits of free popular education, never will re-instate the ancient style of school. The system unfolded never can be crushed back into what it grew from. You can not with all your skill and power fold back the full-blown rose into the bud. You can not crowd back the chicken into the shell.

My friends, when I remember how fast in all matters pertaining to education the world is progressing, and how little I know of that progress in its later marches, I am astounded at my own presumption in addressing you. Perhaps, however, by my ignorance, you have been able, calculating the parallax as it were, to discover the rapidity of your advances. The men that crowd the decks of a man-of-war when all sails are set to a light breeze, little know what headway they are making, till they see how some lone rower in his skiff, with sleeves rolled up, tugs and sweats and falls astern, trying to overtake and board her. Upon such a subject a modest man might well shrink from addressing such an audience—a house full of critics, whose eyes are professionally sharp at seeing flaws in sentences, on whose ears a mis-pronounced word rings the knell of a speaker's reputation, who, like good Samaritans, pause wherever any poor Jew of a noun has fallen among thievish other nouns that rob it of its agreeing verb, who will not fail to observe any widowed verb mourning in weeds its lost nominative, who are sure to be moved over any orphaned adjective left to struggle through a cold dry sentence without a substantive to lean on. Perhaps too, I ought to apologize still farther as I am in that order of business, for addressing teachers without speaking of their responsibilities; but in this it is a consolation to know that never a superintendent, trustee, inspector, examiner or interested friend visiting your school will yield to your urgent request for a brief speech, without speaking eloquently of your responsibilities. If I have come short in this respect, it was not because I was not awake to them; but I knew that where they had occurred to me once, the sense of them had pressed heavily a hundred times on you—that where their shadow had once rested on my mind, you had wearily borne their burden by the hour, by the day, by the year.

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